

Time Frame: Takes place several years after 4th season

Feedback: Definitely! Absolutely! Positively!

Author's Note: Just a piece of fluff, with a minor ****mush**** warning. Thanks to Pam and the Usual Suspects for all their help!

The Best Man

They waited quietly in the anteroom off the front of the church's sanctuary. The dark oak paneling and heavy furniture gave the room a feeling of strength and comfort, although one of the room's inhabitants neither felt particularly strong nor comfortable at the moment.

For the fourth time in as many minutes, the young man inserted his index finger inside his collar, easing the starched fabric away from his throat.

Sitting across from him, the older man watched, his own anxiety heightening. "You okay?" His deep voice broke the silence and seemed to echo hollowly in the small room.

Phillip nodded his head. "Yeah," he breathed. "I'm fine."

Lee nodded, "That's good."

"I'm lying," the young man admitted, once again checking the slim wristwatch on his left arm. "I'm coming out of my skin here."

Lee nodded again, leaning forward, elbows on knees, chin resting on his steepled fingers. "Yeah, I know."

Phillip smiled over at his stepfather. He took another furtive glance at his watch. "It won't be long now," he sighed.

"Nope," Lee leaned back in his chair, stretching his long legs out before him. Phillip's legs mirrored his own, their black oxford-encased feet resting next to each other. Lee moved his foot slightly, tapping the younger man's shoes with his

own. "Relax. You have the easy part. You just walk out there and wait for her. Just say 'I Do' and kiss Katie when Reverend Mills tells you to."

"Were you nervous? I mean when you and Mom got married, were you nervous?" Phillip asked.

Lee hesitated. Neither of the boys knew about the secret marriage ceremony in Marion. They'd ended the charade a few short months later when they had realized that their mystery marriage had been a foolish and futile idea. They'd gotten engaged and married in late August of the same year in a very public and, thanks to Dotty, lavish affair. He hadn't been nervous then. But in Marion... that had been another story.

"Yes," Lee admitted to the young man who was watching him so intently. He drew from his memories of that visit to the Justice of the Peace. "Incredibly nervous. I was so afraid that your mother was going to change her mind. Until I was standing there with her in front of the... well, until she was standing there with me, I didn't really think it was going to happen. But once she looked into my eyes, held my hands... " Lee cleared his throat, surprised at the emotions that the memory churned up in him. He blinked and smiled broadly at Phillip. "Well, then I knew it was for real and I wasn't nervous any more. It felt... I don't know... safe."

Phillip's shoulders visibly relaxed and he smiled into the hazel eyes of the man that he'd come to think of not only as his father, but as a good friend. He blinked back the threat of unexpected tears. His brown eyes shifted to the hardwood floor, pulling away from the emotions that had welled up in him. Something, however, drew his eyes back to his stepfather. "You know, you always have the right thing to say."

Lee's smile softened as he pondered broaching a tender subject. "Phillip, I was honored that you asked me to be your best man. I just hope that this hasn't put a strain on your relationship with Joe. Your father... "

"Is a good man," Phillip supplied as he looked at Lee, a serious expression replacing his smile. "He's a good man, Lee. He's just not a very good father. I gave up a long time ago expecting things from him that he's not capable of giving. I love him, I always will. But when I look back and think about the people that were always there for me as I was growing up, there's Mom and Grandma... and there's you."

The muscles in Lee's chest tightened as he listened to Phillip's words. The gangly teenager had grown up to be such a fine young man, and Lee was so incredibly proud of him. While both the boys had accepted him into the family with open arms, he'd never dared to hope for the kind of love and support that had grown through the years.

"Thank you," Phillip's quiet words startled Lee from his thoughts.

"For what?" he asked.

"For everything," Phillip stated, his brown eyes crinkling into a smile. "For standing up with me today. For loving my mom. And me... and Jamie. For being there and making us a family again. For being a good man, and a good father," he finished softly.

His voice husky, Lee began, "You should thank your mother, I wouldn't be... "

"No," Phillip interrupted him. "I know what you're going to say and Mom didn't make you a good man or a good father. She just gave you the opportunity to show that you could be both."

Lee stared for a long moment into the eyes of his son. "Thank you," he finally said, his voice hoarse from unshed tears.

The door to the anteroom opened and Reverend Mills' head peeked around the corner. "It's time," the minister smiled, the organ music swelling in preparation for the wedding march.

Lee stood and offered his hand to Phillip, pulling the younger man up out of his chair. Clearing his throat, he smiled and winked. "Let's get this show on the road so I can kiss my new daughter-in-law and dance with my wife."

"Yes, let's," Phillip responded, as the two men left the small antechamber, the door closing quietly behind them.

The End